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## Lieut. Gen. William R. Peers, 69, Led Inquiry Into My Lai Massacre

By WOLFGANG SAXON

Lieut. Gen. William R. Peers, who headed the inquiry into the Army's handling of the 1968 My Lai massacre in Vietnam, died Friday evening at Letterman Army Medical Center at the Presidio in San Francisco. General Peers, who had suffered a heart attack last month, was 69 years old and lived in Kentfield, Calif.

The genral, a tough and respected combat commander, was chosen by top Pentagon officials in late 1969 to look into the massacre and name those responsible. It was a year and a half after the assault on My Lai 4, and public revulsion at the delayed revelations was at its height.

News of the case fueled antiwar sentiment on American campuses. It also embittered American servicemen and veterans who saw themselves and the Army as being besmirched by one company of men who had lost comrades in battle, some of whom might have gone berserk under the stress of combat with an invisible foe.

My Lai 4 was a hamlet in the coastal village of Song My in north-central South Vietnam. How many people died the morning of March 16, 1969, remains uncertain, but estimates range far upward from 100.

### 'Tragedy of Major Proportions'

Units of the Americal Division were ordered to clear the area of enemy soldiers who had it booby-trapped and may or may not have been sniping at American troops. What slowly became known later was that the dead included villagers who had been raped, maimed and killed by soldiers acting singly and in groups amid the burning ruins.

The welling outcry caused the Army to throw considerable resources and energy into the study of just how its command chain had dealt with the situation at the time and whether there had been an official cover-up. General Peers assembled a staff of 90 in December 1969 and in three months heard 398 witnesses, took 20,000 pages of testimony and inspected what was left of My Lai.

He concluded that a "tragedy of major proportions" occurred at My Lai but that reports of its enormity and the number of victims had been shrunk at each rung of the ladder as the field reports went up the chain of command. His courage and thoroughness earned the Army much praise.

The "Peers Report" prompted action against 14 officers, including the commanding officer of the Americal Division, Maj. Gen. Samuel W. Koster, by then Superintendent at West Point. The officers were accused of dereliction of duty, suppression of evidence and other offenses.

Within months, charges against 13 of those accused were dismissed on the ground of insufficient evidence. The 14th, a brigade commander, Col. Oran K. Henderson, was court-martialed and acquitted in 1971.

### Calley Found Guilty of Murder

Eleven officers and enlisted men actually present at My Lai were charged separately after the Army's original investigation. A platoon commander, Lieut. William L. Calley, was found guilty of murder. The others were acquitted or never tried.

Lieutenant Calley drew a life term, which was reduced to 20 and then to 10 years. He was freed in 1974 after three years of confinement to quarters at Fort Benning, Ga., and left the Army.

Most of the classified 260-page Peers Report had been disclosed and appeared in print long before Mr. Calley's release cleared the way for its formal disclosure.

Howard H. Callaway, then the Secretary of the Army, said at the time: "The release of this report concludes a dark chapter in the Army's history. This is a story which is not a happy one."

Four months later, the Army released 33 bound books containing 20,000 censored pages of raw data and testimony on which the report was based. Names not previously mentioned were deleted because they might have been implicated by hearsay and innuendo.



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Lieut. Gen. William R. Peers

By then General Peers had quietly left the service after 35 years in uniform. He was deputy commander of the Eighth Army in South Korea in 1973 when the Army announced he was retiring a year early.

### Action in World War II

William Raymond Peers was born June 14, 1914, in Stuart, Iowa. He attended high school in California and graduated in 1937 from the University of California, Los Angeles, where he was on the varsity football and wrestling teams.

He was commissioned a second lieutenant in 1938 and saw action in World War II with the Office of Strategic Services in northern Burma. His experiences went into a book he wrote with Dean Brelis, "Behind the Burma Road."

A big, cigar-chomping man, he also served with the O.S.S. in China, sent American spy teams to Japanese prison camps in China and Korea and led a Chinese parachute assault on Nanjing to occupy that city.

General Peers commanded the Fourth Division in heavy battles in Vietnam's Central Highlands in 1967. When heading the special My Lai inquiry, he was posted in Washington as chief of the Army reserve. His decorations included a Distinguished Service Medal with two oak leaf clusters, a Silver Star and the Distinguished Flying Cross.

General Peers is survived by his wife, the former Rose Mary Rau; two daughters, Barbara Peers Hicks of Fredericksburg, Va., and Christina Peers Neely of Newark, Ohio; a brother, Delbert Peers of Hemet, Calif.; and two grandchildren.

A funeral service was to be held Wednesday at the Cathedral Chapel, Presidio of San Francisco.